

Negotiating ethnic boundaries in multiple ethnic communities: A case study of contemporary Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, Malaysia

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**Negotiating ethnic boundaries in multiple ethnic communities:
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1. Introduction

This ethnographic study of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese in northeastern Malaysia aims to describe cultural traits of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese in various multi-ethnic villages around Kelantan to illustrate what constitutes Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture by examining their ethnic boundary-making practices. Based on previous studies and the data from my own fieldwork, I examine how the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, locally known as *Cina Kampung* (rural Chinese), make and unmake their ethnic boundaries. The long cultural contacts and intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and the local Siamese and Malay people have given rise to the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia as a unique sub-ethnic group.

Some previous researches have approached the issue of identity and ethnic markers from essentialistic and binary points of view. Rayback (1980: 263) regarded Kelantan Peranakan Chinese as a result of accommodation to as well as distinction from local Malays. He downplayed the interaction between Chinese and Siamese and emphasized that between Chinese and the Malays. Employing Erving Goffman's (1959) concepts of impression management and front and backstage, Rayback (1980: 251-252) and Teo (2003: 58) argued that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese would perform Malay cultural practices on the frontstage or in the public space and Chinese cultural practices on the backstage or in the private space. Rayback and Teo also did not discuss the role of Siamese culture/identity in the formation of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture/identity. Pue (2009) tried to explain that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese formed their culture through adaptation to different ethnic groups they had encountered. Tan proposed the co-existence of different identity components and clear demarcation of sub-ethnic boundaries (Tan *et al.*: 2017). Pue and Tan presented Kelantan Peranakan Chinese identity in sharp binary oppositions to others, and did not discuss the dynamic relationship between Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and other ethnic groups. Previous scholars mostly tried to explain how Kelantan Peranakan Chinese adjusted themselves to

the host countries and how they coped with ethnic struggles.

However, in my fieldwork, I observed that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese interact on multiple levels and move between the levels dynamically from one situation to another. This paper examines how Kelantan Peranakan Chinese draw and redraw ethnic boundaries between Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, Malay, mainstream Chinese, and Siamese. I shall argue that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese continually define and redefine ethnic boundaries by keeping, crossing, de-emphasizing the boundaries in everyday interaction with other ethnic group members, which is the salient characteristic of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese practices. I also present the new activities initiated by Kelantan Peranakan Chinese association that influence the existing ethnic boundaries. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese can preserve what they have been practicing, reevaluate their culture, and strengthen ethnic boundaries.

2. Methods

This study employs ethnographic fieldwork in various Kelantan Peranakan Chinese villages, mainly in Bachok, Kota Bharu, and Pasir Mas. I conducted fieldworks in two periods, first two weeks in September 2018 and second six months from September 2019 to February 2020. I observed various aspects of everyday life of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and participated in some events as communal activities, family gathering events, and other daily activities. Further, I conducted participant observation of rituals and ceremonies. I conducted in-depth interviews and semi-interviews with the villagers and key figures of the communities, such as Kelantan Peranakan Chinese association's treasurer and project manager of the gallery and the former headmaster in two villages. I also conducted informal and casual interviews with the locals and other informants in the coffee shop and other gathering places in the community.

I used multiple languages in my ethnographic fieldwork, mostly standard Thai and local Siamese dialect, along with English, Mandarin Chinese, and local Hokkien. My language choice depended on the language informants used during observations and interviews. I did not use the Kelantanese dialect and standard Malay because of my lack of ability in these languages, even though these two are the locals' primary languages when communicating in public space. I relied on translators occasionally when I accompanied with local villagers or researchers who spoke these

languages.

3. Conceptual Framework

This paper combines primordialism and constructivism to analyze ethnic markers and the dynamics of ethnic boundaries among Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. Primordialist perspective views ethnicity as a ‘given.’ Primordialism is an attachment to a group regarding “because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood” (Shils 1957: 142). Later, Clifford Geertz developed the concept and claimed that ethnicity is ‘assumed given’ by being born into a particular community, acquiring a unique language, and following particular social practices (Geertz 1963). Shils and Geertz agree that human-beings need to unite on the basis of bloodline, language, custom, and religion as ‘givens.’

The concept of constructivism was developed first by Fredrick Barth, who stated that “the ethnic *boundary* defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969: 15). An ethnic group’s continuity is determined by maintaining ethnic boundary through continuous *dichotomization* between the insiders and the “others” and through the *structuring of interaction*. The constructivist approach emphasizes the fluidity and socially constructed nature of ethnic identities rather than ethnic markers ‘given’ by birth. Ethnic boundaries are not only maintained but also be negotiated by individuals (Van 2014: 38). Later, Wimmer (2008, 2013) developed the idea of ethnic boundary and aimed to describe different ways in which individuals or actors can shift and modify ethnic boundaries. Wimmer’s theory is based on the idea introduced by Fredrik Barth to explain the ethnic formation and the different results of its strategies. This paper is inspired by Wimmer (2008) on the making and unmaking of ethnic boundary. He offers the typology of strategies to explain negotiation of ethnic boundaries from the constructivist point of view. Wimmer identifies five strategies for making or unmaking ethnic boundary (Wimmer 2013: 49).

“I distinguish between strategies that attempt to change the location of existing boundary (boundary shifting) by “expanding” or “contracting” the domains of the included and those that do not aim at the location of a boundary but try to modify its meaning and implication by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories (normative inversion), de-emphasizing ethnicity and emphasizing other social division (blurring), or changing one’s own position vis-à-vis the boundary

(positional moves).”

I employ primordialism to understand how demarcating characteristics of ethnic groups have emerged over time and explain the importance of primordial Chinese identity that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are maintaining inside villages. Primordial Chinese identity is vital to explain self-identification of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese to narrow their ethnic boundary within the web of relationships among group members, primarily by relying on the ethnic markers ‘assumed given’ by the ancestors. Chinese ethnic identity is viewed in primordial terms as “deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely unchangeable” (van den Berghe 1978: 401). Pan (1994: 267) recognized the core of Chinese identity as the naturalized and unchallenged Chineseness.

I also try to apply Wimmer’s theory to explore broader options for ethnic groups to draw ‘thicker’ or ‘thinner’ ethnic boundaries from a constructivist perspective. I utilize three types of Wimmer’s strategies to make or unmake ethnic boundaries. Wimmer’s typologies of ethnic boundary-making can help explain how individuals use in-group cultural makers to draw ethnic boundary or what Barth has called *structuring of interaction*, which allows the persistence of cultural differences in contact with other ethnic groups.

4. History of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese

Peranakan is the Malay/ Indonesian language; it is derived from ‘anak,’ which means child and combined with ‘per-... an.’ Peranakan originally refers to a womb (Pue 2009: 1). The term became to mean local-born descendants of non-indigenous descent. By the mid-nineteenth century, the term Peranakan became the first specific label used by the Malays to refer to “mixed-blood” descent, particularly in reference to Chinese borne by native mothers (Tan 1988: 44). Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are referred to by different names depending on narrators. Winzeler (1981) called Kelantan Peranakan Chinese *Cina Kampung* (rural Chinese). He stated that the Chinese in Kelantan state are not categorized by dialect groups but divided by areas of settlement and acculturation levels. The *Cina Kampung* (rural Chinese) who are more acculturated and situated in a rural area are differentiated from *Cina Bandar* (town Chinese) or mainstream Chinese¹ who are less acculturated

¹ “Mainstream Chinese” is a term will be used in this article instead of “Cina Bandar” to indicate the differences in term of cultural type because rural Chinese or Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are more

and settled in urban adaptation. According to a Kelantan Peranakan Chinese I interviewed, mainstream Chinese are latecomer who are not acculturated and assimilated to local cultures. The most distinct characteristic is that they speak ‘purer’ Hokkien and Mandarin, and mostly settled down in downtown Kota Bharu. In a similar manner of Tan Chee-Beng’s (1982) explanation, he noted that mainstream Chinese are less influenced by Malay and Thai cultures and have a “purer” Hokkien accent. Kelantan was one of the earliest trading centers for the Chinese people, apart from other important historical trade centers in Southern Thailand such as Nakhorn Sri Thammarat, Pattani, and Songkhla (Winzeler 1981: 2). The existence of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese can be traced back to the thirteenth century (Pue 2019: 37). They came in small groups or as an individual (Wee 1987 as cited in Pue 2010: 33). Most Chinese migrants were from Fujian in Southern China. They migrated through two different routes. First, the Chinese migrated directly from Southern China. During fieldwork, I asked villagers where their ancestors’ hometowns were. Most of them could not tell precisely where their forefathers were from. However, some families have ancestral tablets indicating that they were originally from Fujian province in Southern China. Second, Chinese migrants settled down in Southern Thailand in the first place and traveled downward to the South and settled down in Kelantan. They came from Pattani in Southern Thailand during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries escaping from the chaotic situations there (Hanapi 1986: 30-31; Teo 2003: 38) and also from other provinces such as Songkhla. They traveled overland and settled down along the Kelantan River and in a northern region near Thailand border.

The Chinese settlers occupied and owned the land along both sides of the Kelantan River; the Malays preferred to settle away from riverbanks because the soil along the river was unsuitable for rice cultivation (Winzeler 1981: 7). Kelantan Peranakan Chinese villages are located mostly on the banks along the Kelantan River and small canals along Kelantan River. Unlike the ascendants of the Baba-Nyonya community in Malacca, who were merchants, the Hokkiens (Fujian people) who came to Kelantan were mostly peasants (Pue 2017: 150). Today, some Kelantan Peranakan Chinese villagers still practice farming. Mostly, they plant vegetables, coconut, durian, Duku (a bigger type of Langsat), and some raise Kelulut (stingless bee). At present, we cannot estimate the population of

acculturated to Malay and Siamese or Thai cultures.

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese from the official government documents because most of them are registered only as Chinese, which category includes other Town Chinese and other mainstream Chinese. However, Pue estimated Kelantan Peranakan Chinese's population was around 20,000 or one percent of Kelantan's population in 2017 (Pue 2019: 38). According to Teo (2003), Kelantan Peranakan Chinese have 48 groups in 10 districts, and the recent study from Lim Abdullah (2011) shows that their settlements were counted in 68 villages in Kelantan. An exhibition inside Gallery of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese (Galeri Peranakan Cina Kelantan) by Lim Yong Long in 2018 shows that Kelantan has 72 Kelantan Peranakan Chinese settlements, including Hakka settlements in Gua Musang.

Intermarriage with Siamese women was a benchmark of Peranakan Chinese society in Kelantan int the beginning (Teo 2003: 31). Intermarriage played a crucial role in forming their identity. Marriage with Siamese women was common before the nineteenth century because of the shortage of Chinese women (Tan *et al.* 2017: 16), and Siamese women did not cause any cultural and religious obstacle to marriage. While other Peranakan groups married the Malay women, the early Chinese migrants chose to marry with Siamese women instead. In the *Hailu* (Record of the Seas, 海录), Xie Qinggao² (謝清高) who traveled to Kelantan during the Qing dynasty between 1782 to 1795 (Teo 2003: 28) observed that the Chinese immigrants were not allowed to marry Malay women because Kelantan was a stronghold of Muslim since the late eighteenth century (*Ibid.* : 28) and the Islamic law forbade a Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man.

5. Findings

I borrowed Wimmer's analysis on 'ethnic boundary making' to explain the method that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese use to draw or redraw their ethnic boundaries. I differentiate three ways of making and unmaking ethnic boundaries, keeping, crossing, and de-emphasizing, in examining Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture. They strategically keep primordial Chinese culture and choose to cross over ethnic boundaries and blur some authentic categorization and create new boundaries.

² According to Teo, Xie Qinggao (1765-1861) spent fourteen years in his voyage to Southeast Asia, Europe and America.

6. Keeping the Boundary

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese keep maintaining what they believed as ‘primordial Chinese.’ The Chinese ritual of ancestor worship and ‘Chinese’ deity worship are the main rituals of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese religion. Most of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese always mentioned wedding ceremony as the most outstanding traditional ceremony that differentiates them from other Peranakan groups. I participated in a hair combing ceremony or *Chhiu Thau* (上头礼) in Kampung Pasir Parit in September 2018. Tok Bun Lai (Chinese religious specialist) claimed that it is a peak of this ritual that makes the wedding ‘traditional’ for Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. As the central and the most crucial practice, the hair combing ritual changes one’s status from child to adult. This particular ritual is not observed in other regions, above all in west Malaysia³ (Tan 2002; Pue 2017). Besides hair combing, there are engagement processes, visiting bride-to-be and groom-to-be is also vital ritual that must be performed. Visiting the groom and bride’s house is to pay respect for ancestors and express filial piety, a core Chinese virtue and an essential element of primordial Chinese identity. Confucian ethical system specifies filial piety as respecting the superior and favoring the intimate (Hwang 1999: 170). These procedures are eagerly followed in the village. It is believed that, in the past, overseas Chinese who settled down in Southeast Asia brought from their homes in Southern China the ‘traditional’ wedding ritual similar to the one practiced by Kelantan Peranakan Chinese today. However, it is now almost extinct in other places. Some Peranakan groups, such as Phuket Peranakans, are trying to revive it as the uncommon and ‘long-lost’ tradition (Putthida 2019: 49). By contrast, the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese have kept practicing this ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony for generations. The ceremony has been simplified, they say, but the core is preserved. The ‘primordality’ of the ceremony is thus emphasized and is used to invigorate their culture.

The worships and celebrations practiced in the community are not much different from Town Chinese and mainstream Chinese in Malaysia. However, they keep practicing what they call are traditional customs handed down from their ancestors. It is a remarkable point that they keep

³ Kelantan is one state in East Coast together with Pahang and Terengganu where facing the South China Sea. The term West Coast refer to others 8 states facing Strait of Malaca.

practicing in a traditional way and do not add new meaning by accepting new elements through interaction with mainstream Chinese or Town Chinese who tend to follow new trends in mainland China by adding new elements or celebrations. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese celebrate ‘traditional’ Chinese seasonal festivals such as Chinese New Year (春節), the Cheng Beng festival or (Qing Ming 清明節), the Hungry Ghost Festival (中元節), and the Winter Solstice Festival (冬至). Besides these, Hokkien funeral traditions, especially *Choo Kee* or death anniversary, are still practiced diligently.

The seasonal festivals and post-death events are outstanding events that mark the ethnic boundary because certain particular food is offered and respect is paid to elders in the rituals. Pork is the symbol of Chinese culture (Tan *et al.* 2015: 424). Offering dishes mainly use pork as main ingredients as in *Seng Lay* (three assortment types of meat consist of pork, chicken, and duck). They often cook some pork dishes, such as Bak Hong (stewed pork and chicken), Bak Uan (deep-fried meatball), to celebrate festivals or worship ancestors. These dishes are essential in ancestor worship. They cook pork, which is forbidden to Muslims who are the majority of the country and particularly in Kelantan, which is a stronghold of Islam and controlled by the Islamic party. They cannot explicitly buy or sell pork in the public space. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese must go to a sole *Bak Tiam* (pork market) in downtown Kota Bharu.



Figure 1: Traditional Kelantan Peranakan Chinese in Kampung Balai.

Photo by author, November 1, 2019.

The traditional house of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and the clustered community are also the markers of an ethnic boundary. They settled down together in the enclosed pocket near the main rivers in Kelantan, *Sungai*⁴ *Kelantan*, *Sungai Pengkalan Datu*, and *Sungai Kemasin*. The specific location of their residential area is easy for outsiders to distinguish from others dominant in Kelantan. At present, the traditional house is a distinct marker that indicates the location of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese settlement. Besides, *Dang Long* (燈籠, red lantern) and *Lian* (聯, Chinese couplets) that always express the residents' cultural identity are installed in traditional houses as well as in modern-styled houses. Inside the villages, most of the residents are related to their neighbors. The tie of kinship is remarkable; they build houses in the same village. Villagers also still have a strong bond with relatives across Kelantan. I visited one house to another during my fieldwork, interestingly on the recommendations to visit relatives or families inside and outside villages. Moreover, the activities involved in primordial Chinese rituals, such as wedding ceremonies, Chinese New Year, are always conducted among villagers and relatives in other Kelantan Peranakan villages.

7. Crossing the Boundary

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese speak their version of Hokkien Dialect, which incorporates some elements of Kelantanese and Siamese dialects. Some villages have heavy Kelantanese influence, and some have heavy Siamese influence depending on the locations and density of main ethnic groups who live inside the same village. They substitute Kelantanese dialect and Siamese words for some original Hokkien words. Other Peranakan Chinese groups as Baba Melaka and Penang also cross the ethnic boundary and converse in the Malay language in full (Pue 2019: 34). Nevertheless, some localized versions of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese Hokkien dialect incorporate more local Siamese words. These localized versions vary depending on the surrounding language conditions, but still they use some Hokkien language as their *lingua franca*. The following set of examples illustrates this point:

- Wa Ai Jaeh *Yam Wai Pateh* (I like to eat papaya flower mixed salad)

⁴ Sungai means river in Malaysian language.

- *Tor Rian* Bo Sak Lagi (Durian has not ripe yet)

- Kanagit Lok Hor *Reng* Wai Petai Lhod Leaw (It is heavy raining today, bitter bean's flower fall down)

(Note: normal font indicates Hokkien dialect, Italic Siamese dialect, underline Kelantanese dialect)

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese mainly converses in Kelantanese dialect in public space. When they meet outsiders, they switch to the Kelantanese dialect to communicate with the Malays. For example, inside a coffee shop, all of the customers communicate in Kelantanese dialect. One of key informants stated that they mainly communicate in Kelantanese dialect in public space because everyone can join in the communication, and that many Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are as fluent in the dialect as native speakers. Some are also able to speak Siamese dialect when they visit Siamese villages or travel to Thailand. The communication inside the village is conducted in various languages. I noticed that they speak in many languages at the same time but still able to understand each other in such public spaces as communal halls, retailer shops, and coffee shops.



Figure 2: Daily food of one family inside Kampung Balai, the main dishes are *Budu* (condiment), *Tempoyak* (fermented durian paste mixed with *Budu*), and *Ulam* (fresh and boiled vegetables).

Photo by author, September 27, 2019

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese cross the ethnic boundary between them and the Malays. The most outstanding example is that Peranakan Chinese regularly consume Malay food. Pork is

used only for the purposes of ancestral worship. They do not consume pork in daily life. The most apparent evidence of strong Malay food influence is the eating of *Budu* and *Ulam*. *Budu* is a salty dark brown liquid condiment made from baby anchovies and salt fermented at a certain time. *Ulam* is fresh or boiled vegetables eaten with *Budu*. Most of the informants said they often need to eat *Budu* and *Ulam* in every meal. If they do not have *Budu* and *Ulam* on their tables, the meal is not appetizing, and the stomach cannot be filled. *Budu* is an appetizer consumed with main dishes. Another version of *Budu* is *Tempoyak* or fermented durian paste mix with *Budu* sauce; some add and mix chili and it becomes *Sambal Tempoyak*. This durian paste is popular among the Malays in Kelantan. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and Malays thus have the same sense of taste; however, this pungent sauce repels mainstream Chinese or outsiders outside Kelantan. *Budu* and *Ulam* are considered fundamental dishes among Kelantanese. They also like to use their hands to eat. They practice eating with hands since childhood; which is a Malay custom. Dining with a non-Muslim is considered an exceptional occasion for Muslims, but remarkably, the Malays may dine with Kelantan Peranakan Chinese if they do not cook any pork dish because their foodways are otherwise similar.

The daily outfits and daily activities of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are closer to the Malays. Older women prefer wearing *Batik Sarong* (lower garment worn by women) with a short-sleeved blouse while older men wear *Kain Peliket* (lower garment worn by men) and sometimes, wear *Semutar* (headdress) while working in an orchard. They look like Malays, not like what Tong (2006) called 'default' Chinese phenotype (yellow skin, eyelids) with the ability to speak Mandarin or their dialect and with Chinese blood. Wearing Malay-like clothing makes them appear similar to the Malays. Moreover, the older generation was given Malay nicknames coined from the Chinese names by the local Malays because these nicknames are more comfortable for the Malays to use in communication (Teo 2003). Moreover, they both enjoy traditional Malay performing arts such as *Wanyang Kulit* (traditional shadow play) and *Wau* (Kelantan flying kite). Today, these traditional Malaysian performances are banned by the government but still can be shown. And, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are famous performers of these arts. The popular recreational activity is raising singing birds called *Burung Candik Jambul*. The competition will be held mostly every Friday in Kelantan Peranakan Chinese villages and other Malay villages.

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese have adopted some elements of Siamese ethnic identity. The most outstanding marker of Siamese ethnicity is Thai Theravada Buddhism. They recognize themselves as Theravada Buddhist different from Mahayana Buddhist. Some Chinese are Manayana Buddhists but other Chinese groups say Chinese folk religion is their primary religion. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese regard the worship of their ancestors and Chinese deities as their traditional custom. At the same time, they also practice Theravada Buddhism as a fundamental religious institution. They set the Buddhist altars at home and go to *Wat* (temple). They frequently go to nearby temples and famous temples around Kelantan. They also participate in Siamese Buddhist festivals, and some Siamese festivals held inside temples, for instance, *Wan Pra* (Buddhist holy days); this day involves offering food, a basic necessity, and yellow robes to the monks. *Sai Pret* and *Song Pret* are a ceremony for offering food to hungry ghosts (*Pret* or *Preta* is a hungry ghost who commit a great sin in Buddhism belief), *Loy Kratong* (it is believed that floating lotus-shaped basket to show respect to Goddess of the river) and *Songkran* (water splashing festival or regard as Siamese New Year). These festivals are central to Siamese culture. Also, at the funeral, they invite monks to do funeral shroud chant. The body will be cremated according to Buddhist belief rather than Chinese burial custom in the present days. During the year-round Chinese festival, before or after Chinese rituals, they will invite monks to do chanting, offering food to monks, and making merit. Temples in Kelantan commonly have Thai monks from Thailand because ordination is uncommon. However, ordained monks play an essential role as abbots to manage activities inside the temple and receive titles from both Thai Sangha monastery association and Kelantanese Sultan.

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese favor Thai dishes, especially *Yam* or *Jam* (sour and spicy mixed-salad). Thai dishes always use herbs and chilies and have a pungent and savory taste. I randomly participated in villagers' lunch or dinner; they often cook Thai *Yam* by adding seasonal fruits or vegetables with bird's eye chili. For example, *Yam Bak* (spicy pork salad), *Yam Ti Tau* (pork head spicy salad), and *Tomyam* (spicy and sour soup). An outstanding Siamese dish⁵ is *Khao Yam* or *Khao Jam* (Herbal rice). *Khao Yam* is a popular breakfast inside the village, which is made from

⁵ I called this dish as 'Siamese dish' to emphasize the origin of the dish because it was invented by Siamese who situated around Kelantan plain and the version of the herbal rice is different from the version of herbal rice in Thailand and different from Kelantanese called *Nasi Kerabu*.

various edible leaves. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese also have the same local knowledge as the Siamese to differentiate edible tree from the local surrounding and blend it to make herbal water to cook with rice. Siamese herbal rice is often eaten with various types of vegetables, Budu, and fried fish or chicken.

Besides, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese traditional houses have the basis of Chinese architectural patterns, but also show some features of local architecture, particularly external appearance. The style of the house resembles typical Malay and Siamese house around Kelantan. The concept of Chinese custom influences the location of the ancestral hall and domestic domain pattern. Their ancestors chose to use local material and Malay and Siamese patterns, such as elevated timber floor as a living platform and a wide veranda for daily tasks (Lim and Lim 2014: 8), in building houses and thereby crossed over the ethnic boundary with the Malays and the Siamese. The elevated higher ground is an essential part of the house because their daily activities like cooking, eating, and sleeping mostly happen in this area. The pattern and function are similar to the Malays and Siamese houses. They also sit on the floor instead of chairs. They always welcome guests at the veranda, and most of the time, they chose to sit on the floor. Such features of traditional houses show an adaptation to new socio-cultural environments and to the hot and humid climate.

8. De-emphasizing the Boundary

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese and other ethnic groups inside Kelantan state de-emphasize differences of descents and national racial categorization by emphasizing that they are all *Orghe Kelantan* (people born and grew up in Kelantan). Informants inside the coffee shop asserted that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese become part of Kelantanese society by fluently speaking Kelantanese dialect and have a strong sense of belonging toward Kelantan state. Unique characteristics of Kelantan State provide a specific provincial sense of belonging that blurred the boundary between different ethnic groups. Kelantan state is considered as conservative. Apparently, various traditional Malay practices, such as shadow play, kite flying, and love magic, mostly disappeared on the West coast, are still ordinarily practiced in Kelantan (Rayback 1980: 246). Kelantan Peranakan Chinese continue the work of shadow play and traditional kite to this day. Kelantan consists of the Malay Muslim majority and other small ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have long co-existed with

minimal inference from the ruling Malay elite of Kelantan, yet display an image of strong sense of belonging among diverse ethnic groups (Sathian and Ngeow 2014: 387). Moreover, Kelantan state since the late nineteenth century has been separated from Federated Malay State on the West coast where capital investment is higher and was grouped with northern Malay states as Unfederated Malay State. Such history also contributed to the formation of the Kelantanese identity and a strong sense of being Kelantanese.

The criterion for admission into *Orghe Kelantan* is an ability to communicate in a unique Kelantanese dialect known as *Loghat Kelate*. Thai, Arabic, and Chinese influence Kelantanese dialect due to its historical and trading backgrounds (Pawanteh and Kuake 2016: 186). Rayback (1980: 252) observed that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese were strongly Malay-oriented in public. They fluently speak the dialect like a native in sharp distinction with mainstream Chinese or Town Chinese who prefer to communicate in Hokkien or Mandarin Chinese. Many Kelantan Peranakan Chinese are proud to be Kelantanese and able to speak fluent *Loghat Kelate*. I observed conversations between Kelantan Peranakan Chinese from different villages, and noticed that they preferred to communicate in Kelantanese dialect when they meet other Kelantan Peranakan Chinese or other guests. They said that it was more comfortable to converse in Kelantanese dialect. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese prefer to talk in Kelantanese dialect in the public sphere. Thus, the Malays, Siamese, or other ethnic groups can understand and gain mutual understanding with them.

9. Discussion

Let me now apply Wimmer's ethnic boundary-making strategies and unmaking to the above findings.

The first strategy of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese is to keep the boundary. This strategy attracts individuals and groups with limited access to central political power and whose radius of action remains confined to their immediate social environment (Wimmer 2013: 55). 'Primordial Chinese' characteristic is an important ethnic boundary that differentiates Kelantan Peranakan Chinese from the Malays and Siamese inside villages since the beginning of the settlement. They keep practicing primordial Chinese inside the household. Food is one of identity markers in Malaysia because of religious inhibition. Chinese are Chinese because they eat pork, and Malays are Malays

because they do not, as phrase that often used in Malay society as “*Sama Makan tak Sama Makan*” literally, to eat together and not to eat together (Tong 2014: 10). Kelantan Peranakan Chinese offer pork dishes during the Chinese rituals and ceremonies to demarcate the ethnic boundary between the Malays and themselves. Keeping a thick boundary allows Kelantan Peranakan Chinese to maintain most of the ceremonies and practices inherited from their ascendants who settled down in a rural area of Kelantan. The settlement location and clustering of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese also help mark the ethnic boundary. Most of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese villages are located along the Kelantan River, and the traditional house that has a distinguished appearance marks the physical existence of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese.

The second strategy is boundary-crossing. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese combine and fuse their cultural markers with those of other ethnic groups in the same neighborhood hybridizing multiple cultures into their own culture and thereby cross ethnic boundaries. They are highly skilled in using different languages and dialects in different situational contexts. They are thus able to instantaneously cross linguistic boundaries with other ethnic groups especially, among villagers. Most conversations inside the community are conducted in such a way. They also cross the boundary between the Malays and Kelantan Peranakan Chinese in their daily lifestyle. For example, daily food is a hybrid. “Food habits are seen as the culturally standardized set of behaviors in regard to food manifested by individuals who have been reared within a given cultural tradition” (Mead 2008: 18), and food preference often illustrates cultural closure. Yet, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese crosses the food boundaries since childhood. They also cross the ethnic boundary in their fashion, the terms of address, and recreational activities. These boundary-crossings illustrate the process of cross-cultural interaction with the Malays that helps create the positive relationship with the Malays.

The religious belief of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese is syncretic in that Thai Theravada Buddhism and primordial Chinese folk religion are combined in their religious life. Kershaw (1981: 81) states that Thai Theravada Buddhism continues to flourish among the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese because of the human and cultural factors that they have acquired in the past through intermarriage and cultural borrowing. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese can access Thai Theravada Buddhism because of their basic literacy in Thai. Interestingly, crossing the ethnic boundary and adopting some Siamese religious practices help distinguish the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese not only

from the Malays who are Muslim but also other Chinese groups whose primary religion is Chinese folk religion.

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese selectively cross ethnic boundaries and adopt only some of the Malays and Siamese into their lifestyles. In my opinion, they overcame the challenge of living in the host country by strategically negotiating ethnic identity and by crossing and integrating into the local surroundings. They do not fully cross ethnic boundaries and become totally Malay or Siamese but flexibly reach out to other ethnic groups when they encounter alien cultural traits in culturally plural communities.

The third strategy is de-emphasizing the ethnic boundary. According to Wimmer (2013: 61-62), blurring boundaries decreases the importance of ethnicity and emphasizes the local community, and makes regional identities more salient than ethnic differences. Being seen as Kelantanese blurs their ethnic demarcation under national racial categorization and religion. The term *Orghe Kelantan* established a sense of belonging toward a particular state. Kelantanese dialect is considered a vital factor in this. Kelantanese Malays call Kelantan Peranakan Chinese who express Kelantanese cultural characteristic and live in the same village as *Orang China Sini* (Chinese of here) or *Orang China Kita* (our Chinese) (Rayback 1980: 254) Similarly, as observed by Sathian and Ngeow (2014: 398), Malay Muslims in Kelantan call them *Orghe Cino Kito* (Our Chinese people). These names indicate that the Malays perceive Kelantan Peranakan Chinese as insiders. Moreover, the fluency in the Kelantanese dialect elicits a positive response from the majority of Kelantanese. Sharing the same language and long history as People of Kelantan de-emphasizes the ethnic boundary between different racial categories and emphasizes where they were born and raised. This enables Kelantan Peranakan Chinese to depressurize the tension caused by cultural and linguistic demarcation of ethnicities. Native status as *Orghe Kelantan* emphasizes the solidarity of Kelantanese on the one hand and differentiates their state from other states in Malaysia.

10. New Ethnic Boundary-Making by the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese recently started to equate the traditional house to their uniqueness. Various Kelantan Peranakan Chinese now say that they must maintain their traditional house as one of their outstanding cultural traits. Kelantan Peranakan Chinese association's treasurer

told me that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese used to renovate their own house and reconstruct it in a more modern-style house with concrete. They ignored the cultural value of their ‘outdated’ houses. As with other traditional traits, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese have reevaluated the value of the traditional housing. They always emphasize how well they adapted to the surrounding environments and amalgamated some Malay and Siamese traits and practices into their way of life, but they now claim that it is a unique ‘Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture.’ Kelantan Peranakan Chinese association is the main promotor of this emphasis that strengthens the ethnic boundary around the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese.

Kelantan Peranakan Chinese association or *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Kelantan* (PPCK) was formed in 1989 and comprised of more than 3,000 members with connections to various Peranakan Chinese villages inside Kelantan state. The main office was first located in Wat Pracacinaram, Wakaf Bharu, and transferred to Kampung Pasir Parit, then relocated next to the community gallery in Tanah Merah. The former association’s committee relocated to Kampung Pasir Parit since most of the active members live in this village, and the present location is for office works and gallery. In recent years, PPCK started to initiate various programs and activities to unite Peranakan Chinese throughout Kelantan State. I will discuss two main activities that shows a new movement of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese.



Figure 3: Gallery of Peranakan Chinese, the renovated building from Kelantan Peranakan Chinese traditional house at Tanah Merah town.

Photo by author, December 24, 2019

First, Gallery of Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan (*Galeri Peranakan Cina Kelantan*), a community gallery at Tanah Merah town near Kampung Pasir Parit. The gallery is established through the fund-raising of PPCK and partly financed by the local government. An old-style house was renovated into an authentically ‘traditional’ Kelantan Peranakan Chinese house and turned into a private gallery. The purpose of building the gallery is to create a space for both community members and outsiders where they can study the ‘uniqueness’ of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture. The gallery displays historical background, ceremonial items, food, language, architectural pattern of the traditional house, and recreational activities. Those items show their way of life through the exhibition. This project is completed by cooperation with Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The gallery is the biggest project aimed at preserving and re-interpreting the history of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese from a folk perspective through corresponding with PPCK members to verify the accuracy of information.

The second attempt was to establish *Persatuan Dhamma Pasir Parit* (Dharma center) in 2018. The Dharma center aims to give dharma talk in the Hokkien dialect because most Kelantan Peranakan Chinese do not clearly understand Thai Dharma preaches in Theravada Buddhist temples. Thus, the PPCK association established the Dharma center where volunteers may give their version of Dharma talk. They talk in both the Hokkien version and Kelantanese dialect version. Interestingly, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese did not involve themselves in Dharma talk nor practiced Buddhist ways, and they were mostly donators or participants of Buddhist festivals (Karshaw 1981: 92). However, some members tend to focus on the Dharma essence more than the past. They participate more in the chanting or meditated practicing inside the temple or Dharma center in recent days.

These activities indicate that the association’s members are actively involved in programs aimed at preserving what they perceive as ‘our’ identity by making some aspect of ethnic boundaries thicker and draw new boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and ‘other’ in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia. The activities initiated by PPCK emphasize the social closer between in-group members and the connection with other Peranakan Chinese groups to settle their position as a Peranakan Chinese group. Furthermore, the founding of the Dharma center reflects an attempt to draw a new ethnic boundary within Theravada Buddhism. Dharma center becomes the center instead of a temple for Kelantan Peranakan Chinese to practice Buddhism.

11. Conclusion

In this paper, I examined how Kelantan Peranakan Chinese (KPC) maintain, cross, and de-emphasize the existing boundaries between different ethnic groups inside multi-ethnicity community in Malaysia. KPC have tried to draw and redraw ethnic boundaries since their settlement. They maintain rituals and practices that share ‘primordially Chinese’ culture, draw a thick ethnic boundary, and sharpen it by demarcating the locations between themselves and other ethnic groups. On the other hand, they borrow many elements from neighboring ethnic groups and incorporate them into what they consider as ‘authentic’ KPC culture. In so doing, they are crossing ethnic boundaries and reaching out to Malay and Siamese neighbors as a long and closely related people. KPC is trying to overcome the challenge of being a minority in Kelantan State and by negotiating and crossing some elements and maintaining what they claim as primordial identity. Furthermore, by downplaying the difference of descent and emphasizing the shared local dialect, they create a new ethnic identity as the People of Kelantan. And yet, they are also drawing some new boundaries, for example, in Buddhist practices in dharma center that distinguish them from their Thai neighbors.

Winzeler observed since 1985 that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese maintain “not only ethnic status but also native status in the host country” (Winzeler 1985: 91-92). My findings also indicate that Kelantan Peranakan Chinese still keep practicing primordially Chinese traditions and further develop what they believe is uniquely Kelantan Peranakan Chinese culture and thereby maintain their ‘ethnic status,’ but also that by crossing and de-emphasizing boundaries they also insist on their ‘native status in the host country’.

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